

## *The Christmas Cake*

*Dixon Hearne*

The autumn chill bit into the house deep enough that Mimmaw threw two quilts on my bed at night. She and Papaw slept closer to the kitchen, where the heat of supper lingered in the air a few hours more. There was nothing more reassuring than Mimmaw's nighttime reminder that the Lord loved clean, sweet-smelling children. To go to bed without washing was bad as cursing His name, she'd say, and this close to his birthday would make it twice as bad. Besides, tomorrow was Christmas Cake day.

All night I pitched and rolled and flung the quilts about the bed, fired up with excitement one minute then stinging cold the next. As far back as I could remember, I had been right here on Christmas Cake day. Papaw said I must be lucky, because of all the grandchildren I was the only one that seemed to choose the best time to spend the night. Papaw was the kindest man I ever knew, a giant of a person and gentle as a new calf. The two of them had already, perhaps unwittingly, shaped my notions of what goodness and love meant.

Come morning, I sprang from bed in anticipation of a stack of pancakes and a slab of honey ham that Mimmaw always seared just enough to draw out the best flavors. She shooed us from the kitchen at breakfast time, while she warmed herself to her work with a good amount of fresh-brewed coffee. Papaw was the first one up, though, lighting the gas heaters to back off

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*"Memory is the greatest of artists, and effaces from your mind what*

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the night chill. We somehow managed to settle around the table just in time to watch the sun peek through the two case windows Papaw decided to install at the last minute when he built the house. Even on cloudy days, the view was pleasant – something for every season: apricot and plum trees, holly bush, and cape-jasmine runners that threw off sweet scents with the least puff of wind. Come fall, the big pecan tree would offer up my favorite ingredient in Mimmaw’s Christmas Cake.

At seven o’clock sharp, Papaw left the house on his long walk to the paper mill, a metal lunchbox in hand containing leftover pork cutlets and hot water bread. I wondered if he knew when he set out that it was baking day, but secretly I wanted him to be surprised when he came home to a counter full of golden delights steeping in sweet spices.

Our first order of business was the pans – twelve, to be exact – stacked away in a bottom cabinet, items that saw light of day but once a year. “That’s my special cabinet,” Mimmaw said, “where I keep a lot of memories.” There were other holiday-shaped items, too, but the Christmas pans meant the most, even with their nicks and streaks and baked-on age spots. “Like the twelve apostles,” Mimmaw smiled, lining them up in rows. “A special number for any family,” she added, with a far away look. While I did not know what she meant at the time, I could tell by the way she smiled and shook her head she was feeling warm and proud.

My first job was to smear some butter or lard evenly over each pan’s surface. Mimmaw pulled out her enormous pressure cooker – big enough for a turkey – and placed it in the center of the Formica dining table, where she would work her magic to conjure heavenly confections with my helping hands. All the ingredients were arranged neatly at the end of the table, where we could draw what we needed one by one – sugar and salt and flour and butter, and small vials of red and brown and golden

spices that charged the air with holiday spirit. Mimmaw always started by cracking the eggs. “Three dozen this year,” she announced to me. “An extra three for little Lonnie’s first cake. He’s number twelve, you know. Ain’t that a blessfull number?” Mimmaw was a big believer in signs and messages. That’s the way she felt about the Christmas Cakes – one for each child and each one representing hope and renewal.

Next, we added twelve sticks of butter, one per cake – I was also in charge of keeping track of numbers. Once we got the eggs and butter whipped to a belching froth – done entirely by hand – it was time to add the sugar. “Brown sugar,” Mimmaw said to me, “helps keep the cake good and moist. But white sugar...white sugar is strictly for the sweetness.” To tell the truth, the brown smelled sweeter to me, but it just went to show that I shouldn’t judge things by one sense alone. Any way you looked at it, though, it took a lot more muscle to mix now than it had with eggs alone.

About half-way into it, Mimmaw propped her hands on her hips, mopped her brow with her forearm, and said to me: “It’s a shame we can’t use my mix-master, but we’d be three days making these cakes one by one,” and then let out a loud, round giggle. “Besides,” she said, “it’s more fun to watch it all come together at one time. Like having the whole family right here in my big pot for a while.” We both laughed at that. I kept seeing family faces in the batter’s sheen.

Once we had it all whipped and whirled and sweetened to a sin, the next order of business was getting the flour and soda and baking powder all double sifted and sprinkled into our concoction. This was the hardest part, and we each took turns beating the batter into submission with a big wooden paddle. While I beat and stirred, Mimmaw trickled in secret amounts of vanilla and lemon zest, followed by cinnamon and ginger and other exotic spices from the little vials till the aroma set my

tongue on point again. This all took quite a while, what with stopping along the way to sample it for any imperfection. To tell the truth, I could have cranked and stirred that paddle all day.

The final ingredients were my favorites – pecans and walnuts and cherries. Before we had ever cracked the first egg, we had sat down at the dining table and counted out two piles very carefully. We cracked and picked the meats and set them aside in separate bowls, twelve pecans and twelve walnuts for each cake – no more, no less. The only other ingredient that needed counting was the maraschino cherries that everyone loved so much. Mimmaw decided to throw in a few extra – to grow on. Her family had been raised on Christmas Cake, and all the new family members just naturally took to it. Besides, traditional fruitcakes called for liquor of some kind, and Mimmaw would never let it pass her threshold, let alone her lips.

One last scrape around the giant pot, and it was now baking time. I had all twelve pans lined up, just volunteering to pop themselves into the oven. Mimmaw had picked out the pans very carefully to fit her oven – four to a baking. Once we got the first batch all snuggled in, the remaining batter set patiently in the refrigerator for its turn. I was assigned to finger-sample the batter occasionally to be sure it hadn't gone flat, a job I performed with great responsibility.

In the meantime, Mimmaw was free to visit with Miss Suzie on the telephone and get her daily reports. I secretly imagined the woman could smell our cakes right through the receiver, even before Mimmaw announced to her it was Christmas Cake day. She laughed a good belly laugh and held her smile a long time, listening contentedly to the other woman and her harmless prattle. We whiled away a pleasant afternoon sniffing and sampling and plying the oven with fresh batter yet to be magically transformed. Thoughts of Christmas filled our hearts.

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*cated thing, a relative to truth, but not its twin.” Barbara Kingsolver*

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By the time Papaw made it home from work, the only evidence remaining from our glorious enterprise was an assemblage of beautiful golden circles all neatly arranged on the snackbar, just waiting to be stored in waxed paper and holiday tins. Elfin-like, the pans and bowls and utensils had all been washed and dried and spirited back to their places. And there was Mimmaw still at the stove, bringing gravy to a rolling boil for the chicken and potatoes she had managed to prepare, along with a pot of butter beans she grew and stored last summer. It came together almost effortlessly. It always did. Papaw thumped me on the head, like checking it for ripeness, and threw me a wink.

Outside, the sky had darkened early, signs of the settling cold and the long gray days ahead. But inside, in the warmth and light of 605 McCaskle Street, the season held all the radiance and hope of a spring day. I could not – and cannot – think of a warmer moment to recall.

## *Comfort*

*Joy Harold Helsing*

Her tired, old hands,  
marbled with veins,  
worn from toil,  
still have the strength  
to wipe away  
children's tears.

## Your Grandfather's Leather Reclining Chair

J. J. Steinfeld

What happened to your grandfather's  
leather reclining chair —  
the one in your living room  
by the small window  
looking at the street  
of lackluster dreams  
a long-ago phrase  
from when you were learning  
to be a sardonic poet?  
Who took it in the night —  
shouldn't you have heard?  
That impossibly magical chair,  
you claim, it spoke  
with your grandfather's voice  
the chair your grandfather  
wearily fell asleep on  
while watching *Bonanza*  
on TV week after week.  
My father also watched *Bonanza*  
Lorne Greene an unforgettable  
Pa Cartwright—he was Canadian  
you know, from Ottawa

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*what small pebble it will pick up and store away among its treasured*

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where I stumbled  
in and out of grad school.  
Remember, Lorne Greene  
was the “Voice of Doom”  
on the radio, reporting  
on World War Two,  
your mother told you.  
Your grandfather fought  
my grandfathers perished  
same war, different memories.

## *Autumn*

*MaryEllen Letarte*

Yesterday’s leaves shrink,  
hang loose, like Grandma’s hands.  
Knowledge of tomorrow  
hides within the limbs of children and oaks  
untroubled by clouds.  
Grandfathers keep watch  
under the darkened sky.  
Trees shiver.  
Acorns fall.

## *Tillie*

*Mary Krauss*

Tillie looks out at me from  
behind pinz-nez glasses  
and a gilded frame of long ago.  
A slight smile,  
a thoughtful tilt of her head  
cheek resting on a long-gloved hand.  
She seems to know she can sell  
the tulle and rose-covered creation  
that crowns her upswept coif —  
the latest offering from her millinery store.  
A strong, confident woman  
circa 1910.  
She couldn't vote  
but surely participated  
in the growing strength of women.  
It is my loss  
that you left the earth  
the year I arrived.  
I could have learned a lot from you,  
my Tillie,  
my grandmother.

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*uncharted course. So live today so it will be a memory without re-*

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## Alone on a Train

Kimberly Hill

I awoke in a state of panic as the train lurched forward and the conductor called out the stop for Berlin. I looked to the window, fearing the sight of a motorcade of tanks and a Mercedes-Benz leading Hitler through the streets with his hand raised at an angle giving and receiving a façade of respect, swastika banners flying ominously through the stale air, and rigid lines of Nazis soldiers sending the world their message of threat and intimidation. It was with relief that instead I saw crowds of trees starting to turn gold and orange from the impending Autumn season, tall grasses waving in the September breeze, and lines of telegraph poles along the train tracks. As I let out the breath I didn't realize I had been holding, I whispered "Berlin, Connecticut. Of course. How would I have gotten to Berlin, Germany from Taunton, Massachusetts by train?"

I was embarrassed that my thoughts had drifted to a place I had only heard about on radio news programs, despite having no travel companions to notice my bewilderment. I readjusted myself in my seat and smoothed the beige cotton dress against my lap to regain my composure. I then watched the real scene pass across the window as the train left the Berlin station. I was calm again, rocked by the familiar rhythm of the train.

I started riding this train nine long years ago, back in 1930, when I was only six. My father was without work since the carnival he worked for was closing down. He said folks had

nothing to celebrate anymore. In the passing weeks I could hear the desperation in my mother's voice as she demanded that Pa find a way to get us food. We soon became regulars in the line at the city mission to get soup for dinner. When my mother told Pa that I didn't have a decent dress for church, he went to the charity office to get a dress for me. When he returned with a bright orange dress, my mother was furious. Soon thereafter I was wearing my orange dress, riding alone on a train.

When I returned from my grandparents two months later, my father was gone. Not like when he was traveling with the carnival gone, but gone as in no signs that he ever existed. And so was my home. My mother brought me to a dilapidated old boarding house they called "Salamini's." White paint was peeling off the rotted clapboards of the tall white house with seemingly too few windows and doors for its size. The only feature that kept the building from fading into the bleak backdrop altogether was groups of men and an occasional woman congregating around the green door in front leading to the pub downstairs frequented by the factory workers. Uncle Larry was one of the men who frequented this pub. We were now living with him, my grandmother, Aunt Lorraine, and Aunt Meg.

The six of us had only one bedroom and a porch. There were two big beds in the bedroom, and a couch on the porch. With some of them working days, and some working nights, somehow the sleeping arrangements worked out. Uncle Larry worked at night in the factory. My mother earned some money scrubbing clothes and cleaning newly vacant rooms of the boarding house. My grandmother worked the evenings washing glasses down at the pub. Aunt Meg and Aunt Lorraine worked as seamstresses whenever they could find the work. I was a burden that got in the way around the clock.

The train gradually became my home, in that it was the one place I always returned to. My mother, and later other family members, would put me on a train to whoever would take me. All the places I have stayed over the years pass through my mind like the scenery blurring by the train window. At each stop I tried to show what a good daughter I would be by helping with the cooking, cleaning and wash. I kept my dress tidy, minded my manners, and only spoke when spoken to. But at the end of the day, as we all sat around table to eat dinner, I anxiously counted the slices of meat on the platter. I always knew that when there came a time when there was not enough to share, it was me who would have to go.

And the time for me to go always came. I would board the train, and watch through the window as my borrowed life passed me by once more. I prayed each night that I would find the family where I truly belonged. When I arrived at my Aunt Edna's, I foolishly hoped that since I was her namesake, she could find a place for me in her home. Perhaps even in her heart. But she could not even give me a place to live for more than a few weeks. As she packed my few clothes and hairbrush in my suitcase, Aunt Edna enthusiastically told me that I was going to my Aunt Millie and Uncle Edward's home on Long Island. She said all the school children in town were given tickets to the 1939 World Fair in New York, and that I was welcome to go.

As my body swayed with the movement of the train, I closed my eyes and imagined the World Fair. I envisioned my aunt and uncle, whom I did not even remember meeting, showing me all the attractions I had heard about on the radio. The fair promised a glimpse into "The World of Tomorrow." As I was dreaming of all the wonders the world of tomorrow promised, I fell asleep. And here I was now, recovering from my state of panic in Berlin. I shook my head again as I whispered "Of all the crazy ideas. Berlin, Germany..."

When I arrived in Flushing, I took out the slip of paper with Aunt Millie's address written upon it. Despite being fifteen years old and riding the train for nine years, I never grew accustomed to not knowing where I was going. I finally found my way to Aunt Millie's house, walked up her stone walkway to her charming white house with green shutters, smoothed the wrinkles from my beige dress, fixed a smile on my face, and knocked at the door. When Aunt Millie opened the door, I knew why I had never met her before. She was living in a different world than I. Her world did not revolve around simply trying to survive. Her hair flowed to her ears in chestnut brown soft waves. She wore a small gray beret tilted at an angle atop of her head. Her well-tailored green dress belted at the waist was like the clothing I had only seen in my aunt's *Good Housekeeping* magazines.

"Well, you must be Edna. Come in dear. Would you like to sit down and have a glass of iced tea?"

Her high heels clicked upon the wood floor as she led me into the kitchen. As I accepted the cool beverage, I began my efforts to make a good impression. "Thank you Aunt Millie for inviting me to stay with you and Uncle Edward."

Aunt Millie graciously smiled. "You are welcome dear. We are glad we are able to help."

"And I am so excited about you taking me to the World Fair!"

Aunt Millie's smile faded, and turned to a sympathetic stare. "Oh honey, we're not taking you to the World Fair. All my students at the school were given tickets, and I had a few extra. I thought you might go on your own. There is a train that can take you right to the fair's gate, or you can walk. It's only about a mile from here." I felt all hope plummeting to the ground.

I had already done a lot of train riding in my past, and was tired of being alone on a train, so I decided to walk into the

“World of Tomorrow.” When I passed through the gate of the fair, I discovered the “World of Tomorrow” shared one similarity with today; I was alone and had no idea where to go. I decided this time I would decide where to go for myself. I chose the grandest attraction on the map, situated in the center of it all, the Trylon, a 700 foot triangular tower, and the Perisphere, a globe shaped building as wide as a city block. The buildings promised visitors a glimpse into the future.

I walked through roads filled with couples strolling hand in hand, families with mothers holding their children’s hands while fathers looked at the map of the fair, and school children marching in lines led by their teacher. As I took in all the sights alone, I tried to act as if I were merely separated from people who cared about me. I pretended I was simply waiting for someone as I paused to marvel at a spectacular fountain where a dozen jets of water were forced high into the air. I then closed my eyes and spread my arms to savor the mist blown at my body by the cool autumn breeze. I imagined I was flying free above the clouds and toward a better world. I then opened my eyes and was awed by the Trylon and Perisphere towering over me. It was as though the Trylon was reaching through sky.

I went inside the Perisphere and saw a model and film showing a vision of the year 1960, a world with seven lane cross-country express motorways taking people safely to their jobs and where old slums of the city were replaced with new thriving neighborhoods and parks. I was amazed at a TV set, which was like a radio set that included flickering images with the sound. I passed through the nation buildings in the Government Zone. I saw a world without Germany, the only super power without a building at the fair. The deep melodic voice of the film narrator echoed in my head “The future is whatever we propose to make it.” The future promised prosperity, science, technology, and hope.

After visiting all the future had to offer, I went to the amusement area and visited my past. The ground thumping rhythmically as the cyclone roller coaster rushed by, dance floors filled with people dancing to the sounds of the big jazz bands, and carnival barkers calling attention to the Frozen Alive Girl and the Little Miracle Town of performing midgets brought me back to memories of my father. I wondered whatever became of him, whether he had found work in the carnival once again. I wondered if his life had brought him here to this future too.

And I wondered what future my own life would bring. As I listened to the sounds of excitement and laughter in the amusement area, I realized that what I wanted for my future was the thrill of living; life beyond just survival. I could not control that I was alone, but I could still find joy in the life that I had been given. There was happiness all around me; I just needed to find a way to make it my own. I looked up, shielded my eyes from the setting sun, and watched the gaily colored parachutes drift down from the 250 foot tower called the Life Savers Parachute Jump. The sounds of excited screaming called to me. I was enticed by this truly frivolous experience. I felt my spirits lift in anticipation.

I had the forty cents required to ride; money my Aunt Millie had given me for train fare. I would not be riding the train, at least not today. All I needed was to find another passenger to share the double seat with me, and after all these years, I was good at finding people to help me for short periods of time. I was ultimately paired up with a girl whose sister was too scared to join her on the ride. I was silent as I savored the suspense and thrill of the steady climb to the top of the tower. I could see the Trylon, the Perisphere, and all the future laid out before my eyes. I felt a sudden jerk as the parachute was released. And then I flew.

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*that they are standing by.” Unknown ~§~ “The best kind of friend is*

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*This poem is about*

*Ann Howells*

– the orange, pierced, and the rind that unwinds  
in perfect unbroken spiral beneath her knife  
– the long grey hair, braided, twisted in a bun,  
but never once, in all her life, cut  
– the needlework that overflows, cascades  
intricate and fine, to puddle at her feet  
– the ungainly clay-colored corset she dons  
each morning, its rows of hooks and eyes  
– the jars of put up jellies that fill her kitchen  
with stained-glass color in morning sun  
– the grandson who fabricates empties found  
in backs of drawers, beneath the mattress  
– the apple doll appearance – little, bent, brittle —  
yet nicknamed velvet bulldozer by her son  
– the swan-neck rocking chair, arms stroked shiny,  
worry-stone for idle hands

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*the kind you can sit on a porch swing with, never say a word, then*

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## *Ex Hale*

*Dana Huber*

You, my grandfather  
With the dry skin on your elbows  
Loose now  
With the skin in folds like plastic bags  
With your eyes clouding and heavy-lidded  
With your chest damp with drool.  
You, my grandfather.  
Today I sat and breathed with you, the slow breaths  
Timing myself to you while you dozed, fitful, hands twitching  
    at remote  
Bed grinding uselessly beneath you, going  
Nowhere.  
Whirr whirr whirr through the hot afternoon.  
Each pause between the rise, after the fall  
Made my throat thick, and I parted my lips  
To say the words, to call the others  
But your chest moved, the air flowed.  
I could not keep your rhythm  
And like car blinkers at an intersection  
We moved in and out of sync with each other.  
  
You are cargo to be moved now, silent, unprotesting  
Speech one of the things left behind you  
As you lighten the load

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*walk away feeling like it was the best conversation that you ever had.”*

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That atrophied muscles must carry.  
(You, who carried me in one hand  
from the hospital.)

Leaving bits of you:  
Talking, eating, drinking —  
it was All  
Too much work.  
You fall in on yourself, your spine  
Too burdened with your head, your wrists  
Too burdened with your once-strong fingers, your body  
Too burdened with this effort called life.

But your chest moves and the air flows.

*how mch longe* you typed, days ago already, I don't know, no  
answers, there are none  
there is only this waiting  
your lungs filling, emptying, filling, emptying  
and the bed going up and down, going  
nowhere again  
I still your fingers  
You do not notice.  
what time is it, what day is it?  
time has lost all hold on you. There are no days  
Only the seconds between breaths  
and the hours between morphine  
Which drips from your lips  
And lands pink on the white towel.

I memorize the lengthening stubble on your face  
While I wait for you to breathe, to stop breathing  
But your chest moves.

## Grandpa Dances

IFMiller

At 6 p.m. like clockwork  
he came, washed his hands,  
muttered a *bruche*\*  
tossed back a *schnapps*\*  
and ate from the plate  
Ma set out for him.  
His mask face  
never looked up.

When he died in my arms  
on the subway platform  
he looked the same  
though his eyes were closed.

Last night  
he closed his eyes  
and danced on my ceiling  
hands above his head  
swayed in ecstasy  
stamped the ground.

When I greeted him,  
he ignored me  
and sang a *nigun*\*.

\*In Yiddish, *bruche* is blessing; *schnapps* is whiskey; a *nigun*  
is a wordless song intoned as a prayer.

## Kitchen Chore

Roxanne Hoffman

With a quick twist and twirl of the knife, a sleight of hand like *der kishefmakher* [magician] plucking a spanking-brand-new silver dollar with a flick of his white-gloved fingers gleaming from behind an unsuspecting ear, or culling a cavalcade of pink-eyed rabbits, a flock of cooing doves, a rainbow of silk scarves, a bouquet of blue cornflowers and fresh cut daisies from his seemingly empty black top hat, Grandma Molly extracts the glistening orange peel in one long continuous spiraling curlicue, releasing its sweet and sour jasmine-like fragrance without marring the firm flesh of the fruit or spilling a drop of its tasty libation.

Dangled on the tip of the blade, she displays her trophy for me to inspect like a prized Barguzin sable pelt before dropping it into the bubbling contents of the steaming vat. Then she passes me the knife, hands me an orange and leans back in her chair to watch, hands folded behind her head, lips pressed closed but smiling, her belly rising and falling rhythmically, then rumbling with laughter, her cries resonating throughout the kitchen, as I squirt orange juice everywhere, squinting to avoid the sting, clumps of slimy pulp and bits of white sticky rind all over my hands, just managing to extract the tiniest bit of zest before the bright orange sliver slips from knife to floor. Molly passes me another orange to try again, nodding her head to give me encouragement and direction. Satisfied with my third

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*with old age. Nothing does - except wrinkles. It's true, some wines im-*

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attempt, she reaches behind her back to tug open the kitchen drawer, and pulls out a second knife.

Orange by orange, we twist and turn, twirl and twirl, the kitchen filling with steam, brimming with sweet stickiness, the oranges' piquant scent nipping at our nostrils, driving us to work steadily until each orange is skinned. We pause only to blot our faces with our heavy bleached-white cotton aprons.

When we are done, we each select a peeled orange to reward ourselves, pulling apart sections, plunging the firm flesh in our mouths to release instant gratification, then take turns spitting out pits into the brown paper bag lining the garbage tin.

After a final stirring of the bubbling brew with wooden spoon, Molly shuts off the stove, slams down the heavy cast aluminum lid with a potholder to announce the chore complete, and sends me off, skipping, to wash up for tea with her kiss pressed to the top of my head.

I pass Great-Grand Mama who is just rousing herself from her nap, stretching up from her rocker by the parlor window as she beckons me in Yiddish "*Kumzits, Libhober! Kumzits!*" with a wave of her hand.

"Ja, ja, ja! I coming, hold your horses!" I call back but all I'm thinking of is tomorrow's treat of candied orange peel as I stare at my beautiful orange-stained fingers, reluctantly reaching for a bar of soap, the lukewarm water cascading over my fingers under the sink, the scent of the oranges still tingling my nostrils as I discard the apron to come out to join her and Molly for tea.

I hear the gurgle, the final hiss of steam, the tea ready to bubble forth from the spout of the brass samovar into awaiting glasses, see Great-Grand Mama seated at the dining table grinning with two white sugar cubes perched between her cigarette-and-tea stained yellow teeth, and Grandma Molly standing with a polished silver tray lined with white paper

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*prove with age. 'But only if the grapes were good in the first place.'*

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doilies, piled high with *babkah*, *rugelach* and *tertle*. Ah, the sweet fruits of labor!

## Ice Cream Saturdaes

Ginny Greene

Each week before his visit, Grandpa stopped by the ice cream shop to pick up a treat for us – five gallon cartons of frozen chocolate or strawberry. Rock hard from the freezer case, always well into the visit before Mom could begin to chip small chunks. Eight bowls lined up, a sweat and huff-puff effort even counting the time setting on the drainboard to soften. We chopped and stirred till creamy, then savored, knowing we'd be urged to take seconds (Yes!!) since the ice box wouldn't keep it hard. And once we got a real fridge, the freezer case was only a small square, always thick with ice. Grandpa never thought to buy a smaller size. The biggest was his only choice, same size as his heart.

## Cigar

Hiram Larew

It's clear to me now  
 As eggs next to twine  
 Clear as six is to five —  
 I know exactly what he thought  
 Back then  
 At his age  
 Clear as close shaving  
 Because I have his feet

Moreover of late  
 Something from then keeps whispering to me  
 Like soap on a shoulder  
 It isn't him exactly  
 It couldn't be  
 But it's saying up close  
 To go further

I remember  
 Deep weeds at the faucet  
 Hay sacks in the back  
 And a hillside hardly belonging  
 But more than anything  
 There were my arms like string beans  
 That weren't good for much he surely thought  
 Except his future —  
 Something about me made him cough

If I do anything now  
It's because he said so little  
The surest sign of strength  
Is quiet  
Coming up the steps  
And looking at me.

## *Lodgia*

*Heather Ann Schmidt*

Pale petals fall from the snowball bushes  
planted at the Fisher house...  
and another season is passing  
like you did in your dreaming.

And I will sing for you the song of your mother:

*Ach spij kochanie...*

and you will be young again  
walking down Main street in Chicago with Louis  
like in that picture that hangs in your foyer.

We will leave the window to your bedroom open  
in hopes you will visit us in the scent of  
a Spring night such as this.

## *The Memory of Taste*

*Athena Strickland*

I hadn't seen that brand in years.  
Three chews and the taste of the clove gum  
Put me back at Grandma's.  
She always carried two packs  
In the pocket of her apron  
Along with stitched handkerchiefs  
That she sewed  
By the light of a kerosene lantern  
Even though she had electricity.  
She used it sparingly.  
Every day at three her radio was tuned in  
To an evangelist  
Out in California.  
She was strong in her devotion to him.  
She mailed him a new dollar bill  
Faithfully, every week.  
He returned the gesture  
By sending her a measure of prayer cloths  
He'd personally prayed over.  
Neither the cloths nor the preacher  
Had the power to save Grandma  
The afternoon she died  
While napping on her divan  
Two packs of clove gum in the pocket of her apron

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*any old fools." Unknown ~§~ "By three methods we may learn wis-*

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A handkerchief in her hand  
The kerosene lantern out  
The radio on.

## *Brush Your Teeth*

*Joanne Faries*

It's morning  
Nana's teeth float in a jar  
I stare at them  
fascinated, frightened

sleepovers mean candy  
walks, games  
we read aloud

I niggle at my loose tooth  
worry about needing  
a jar

Nana smiles, reassures  
strokes my hair  
tooth fairy tales  
shiny dimes under my pillow

brush twice a day  
she urges  
revealing her toothless  
grin

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*dom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which*

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## Coat

*Janet McCann*

My mother left me a mink coat,  
tawny and soft. It troubles me  
and I want to bury it in the yard,  
say a few words over it, let it  
return to earth, like any other  
animal that lived its life and died.

But my husband would be disturbed by this  
and think I'm nuts, so would the neighbors  
and it would moreover seem disloyal  
to my parents, my father who bought it  
because they thought that's what men did  
and my mother, who wore it in the innocence

of the fifties, when few concerned themselves  
with animals, with exploitation, or  
with even the earth itself and how we used it.  
Maybe someday I'll do it, bury it  
out back in a big box, and cause the man  
next door who doesn't like me anyway

to call the cops. Meanwhile it lies  
in the cedar chest, beneath a pumpkin costume  
and witch's hat, a broken-framed pup tent,  
a half-finished sampler by my mother's aunt,  
a tattered quilt—all half-forgotten things  
that I can neither own nor cast away.

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*is easiest; and third, by experience, which is the most bitter." Confu-*

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## Missing

*Ken Staley*

By the time I was old enough to know better, the Aunties – Ruth and Mabel – lived together for some years. From late summer until after Halloween when cold weather stepped in, the two sisters picked us up from the house and walked us down to Uncle Ed’s store to wait for the school bus. In my mind, they were, and still are, sitting in their cedar rocking chairs just to the left of a dust encrusted screen door. On many school days, they fetched cups of coffee from the store, one for my little brother, Dakota, one for me, and an extra for the bus driver, most days. Thanks to the Aunties, we got hooked on coffee early, Dakota and I.

“Why you givin’ her a cup?” I demanded one day when I was particularly upset with the driver and didn’t care if she got anything, much less a cup of Uncle Ed’s coffee.

“Myrna Jane been haulin’ the likes of your young butt around this county for generations,” Ruth said. “I swain, she deserves a medal of honor, seems to me, but coffee is what we got.”

Just fifty feet up the lane from a really bad curve in old Highway Fifty-two, squatted KENDALL GROCERY, its peeling white-wash clapboard and tin roof streaked with rust pleaded for attention that never came. Uncle Ed’s store was the best place in Boiling Cherry Hollow for a school bus stop. To us, it was always just Uncle Ed’s Store.

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*cicus ~§~ “To know when to be generous and when to be firm -- this is*

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In the late summer and early spring, the two Aunties perched outside on old, cedar rocking chairs. As they got older, shawls, old comforters and seat cushions joined them, but in my memory, every school day began with a walk to Uncle Ed's with the Aunties. Uncle Ed called them his cigar store Indians, but never in their hearing. He wasn't far wrong as Auntie Mabel always claimed we had Cherokee blood in our past.

Auntie Ruth may have been a mite older, but it was the same, for all that. She braided her hair with colorful bits of cloth, the tresses hanging almost to her lap. Ruth went grey very slowly.

"See, it's kids that do it to ya," she said one September afternoon when it was too hot to stay inside the store. She let a handful of her tresses fall across her face like a theater curtain. Cross-eyed, she singled out the grey strands. "I paint them fresh every morning just to remind me."

"Really?" My brother, who still believed in Santa and the Easter Bunny, crawled into her lap to examine those hairs closer.

"This'n here is Eddie Earl," she said. "This'n here is my first grey hair. My son, Elbert, give it to me when I was still babyin. He gimme lots and I still get a new one now and then from El."

"Which one is mine?" He asked seriously. That got him hugged and a great peal of laughter from the Aunties. Auntie Ruth had a little girl's laugh, a high giggle that she tried to hide behind her hand whenever it erupted. Auntie Mabel's cackle was a classic, witch-like chortle and the butt of many jokes from the gathering inside.

"You two tryin to lay eggs again?" Uncle Ed called from inside the store.

"He's the one," Auntie Mabel said of Uncle Ed. "I turned grey all at once and it's all his fault!"

Auntie Mabel once had lovely chestnut hair. Now she wore it in a tight bun pulled severely away from her face.

“Time was I had a friend who chased all the grey away,” Mabel explained to Dakota, who was still examining Ruth’s hair closely.

“Really? Where did she go then?”

They laughed again but Mabel wasn’t quite ready to give it up just yet.

“Why her name was Miss Clairol,” Mabel told him. “She lived in a bottle.”

“Oh she didn’ neither,” Dakota lisped with his own bashful smile. He was still missing his two front teeth at the time.

“I swain, right hand afore God,” Mabel lifted her left hand. “She lived in a bottle and came out about four times a year just to make your Auntie Mabel look pretty.”

She cocked her chin to one side and up, batted her eyes at him, and put her hand behind her head, striking a “glamour pose.”

“Did the bottle break then?” Dakota asked, now taken in.

Mostly, the Aunties taught us about life, in their own fashion. They sat in those chairs, day in and day out, and inspected every visitor to Ed’s store without comment – well, mostly without comment.

“That’s Daisy Richardson,” Mabel hissed to Ruth one spring afternoon as a large woman went in to do her shopping.

“No!” Ruth said and turned for another look, but the dust that collected in the screen door didn’t allow much more than a peek at her silhouette. “What happened to her?”

“Kids,” Mabel leaned back, assuming an air of deeper insight, “and that no account man she shacked up with so long. She done had eight of his before he disappeared. You remember. ’Twas in all the papers.”

“But she got so big,” Ruth said. “I ’member her in high school as this little bird of a thing.”

“Still would be, too, I’m guessin’,” Mabel said. “But she got the women’s problems and swelled up like a balloon. I heard tell she been seein’ that herb doctor up to town, but don’t look like he’s helped much. She shoulda stuck with Aunt Fenny.”

Another day, another visitor; a man this time, with a funny lurch and almost a hesitation in his walk. He came to the door, tried to peer through the dirty screen and opened it cautiously, like someone was about to scold him for doing so.

“Rory the simple,” Ruth said after he stepped across the threshold and closed the screen gently, without letting it slam. “He rode the other bus when I was in school. Nice enough boy but jumped outta his skin at any loud sound.”

“What’s wrong with him? Is he a retard?” Dakota asked.

“Hold your piece!” Ruth scolded and reached out to flick his ear. Dakota yipped loudly. “God done scrambled his brains good when he was born. Ain’t no call for you to be remindin him he ain’t all there. He knows that already.”

It was a mild October, I remember. An Indian summer crept up the hollow and made collecting acorns thirsty work. I remember clearly the pumpkins and corn stalks marking Halloween bunched together in front of Ed’s store, along with bushels of acorns we collected. Uncle Ed paid us a dollar a bushel. It was easy money. We brought back two heaping bushels, leaving an acorn trail back up the path to our favorite oak.

“They gotta have their caps on now, hear? Them tourists love acorns and’ll buy a ton of ’em, but they gotta have their caps on,” he said by way of direction.

Dakota disappeared and I sat on a free spot on the rail, fanning myself, trying to get cool when the Aunties became all too human. Auntie Ruth reached into her pocket for her fixins’, a ritual she usually started first thing every morning. She carefully laid two thin papers on her lap, took her pouch and

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*sumptions, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge.”*

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lightly sprinkled in the fillings, then deftly rolled the whole thing, slipping it into her mouth to seal the paper as a last move. Time was, she let Dakota or I light her smokes. I guess I was just too old for that treat now. Before this day, the routine was such a part of her that anything slightly sinister never entered my mind. I must have been a teenager by then, or very close, because what had always been Auntie Ruth's fixins now took on a whole new meaning. Ruth and Mabel always rolled their own smokes, explaining to me once that "the cost of store boughts is too dear to waste."

Truth was, Auntie Ruth's 'home grown' consisted of half tobacco and half sensimilla. Shock must have registered on my face. Ruth and Mabel laughed almost as loud as I'd ever heard them.

"How the mighty slip from their pedestals, eh Mabel?" Ruth said as she gasped for air. "Would you like some, Janey Sue?"

"I would not!" I'd heard the horror stories. I'd seen the burned out husks at my school, generally boys from bad families. A few years passed, and a child or two came, before I enjoyed the Aunties recipe of morning coffee and smoke.

About that time, Dakota brought out our Dr Peppers, filled with peanuts. As he settled on a chopping block, Ruth farted. It was a gentle thing, would have passed without notice and only slight embarrassment, but Dakota was there and still thrilled with bodily functions, the way young boys can be. With a snort, soda squirted from his nose.

"You farted!" He called when he could speak again.

"Why Dakota Edward James, I never," Ruth exclaimed indignantly. "If you please, sir, women do not fart."

"You did so," Dakota said. "I heard you."

"That warn't no fart," Mabel said.

"Was, too," Dakota said, a bit miffed at being called out.

“No it warn’t,” Mabel said. “That couldn’t have been a fart. Ruth didn’ go no where or raise up at all. Now this is a fart.”

With that, she leaned over and passed gas – loudly.

Dakota howled with laughter. Ruth blushed just a bit, then leaned over and tooted two or three times, only to be answered by Mabel’s trombone one note.

Our laughter brought Uncle Ed to the door this time, something rare.

“She farted,” Dakota said as he pointed at Ruth, “then she farted. They been havin a battle of the farts.”

“Musical ass holes, huh?” Uncle Ed snorted and returned to his circle. Laughter from inside showed that he’d shared the news. My guess is those old boys inside did their best to match the Aunties, but they had a long, long way to go.

The Aunties were sisters separated by less than two years and always a staple in my life. I can’t remember a day in childhood that I didn’t see them. I never really thought about why they were living together, or that happened to their husbands. I don’t recall anyone ever mentioning the uncles.

Auntie Mabel went first, so slowly we hardly noticed for a few years. Ruth noticed.

“She just missing sometimes,” Ruth said one day with a smile as Mabel picked at the front of her flowered dress. “Seems like these missing streaks get longer and longer. She just sort of takes off in her mind someplace. Wish I knew where that was.”

Eventually, they had to take Mabel in for a physical. The news was very grim, so grim that they couldn’t tell Dakota or me.

“You just keep a special eye on Mabel when she’s around,” Uncle Ed said a few days later. “You make sure she don’t go wandering off somewhere.”

“Why would she leave?” Dakota demanded.



“Never you mind. Your job is just to make sure she don’t go alone.”

Ruth followed close on, sure enough. Another trip out of the hollow, another grim diagnosis.

I was in high school by then and nearly at the top of my class. I guessed at first, then did some research. Sure enough, the Aunties had early onset Alzheimer’s. Worse, for all they did for me and mine, there wasn’t a thing I could do for them – but be there, I guess. I had a long talk with Uncle Ed about it.

“I can make it up next year,” I said as I offered to stop school and sit with the Aunties. “Really, Uncle Ed, I can go down to the junior college over in Macon.”

“No,” Ed said flatly and would brook no further argument. “Look, honey, this could take years and years. The doctor don’t know himself how long. You finish that high school and get your scholarship, you hear? We’re proud of you and if you quit now, you’re going to make a lot of people sad and angry. My sisters will be just fine as long as they remember where their chairs are out front.”

Although Ruth started later, her deterioration came on much more rapidly. Within a year, whatever there was that made Ruth – Ruth, evaporated. Eventually, to keep Ruth steady and ‘home’, Mabel walked her to her chair every morning on a kiddie leash. I sat by her, day after day, usually reading a story. Sometimes Ruth demanded the Bible, although she rarely, if ever, attended services that I recall. She did so love the Psalms.

Mabel slipped away quietly, but much much further. Ruth seemed to have some deep-seated understanding of where home and hearth was. Mabel wanted to roam, to visit places she’d heard about but never seen. One Saturday when I caught her, she had an old grass suitcase, filled with flowers and two jars of molasses.

“Paris,” she said when I asked where she was going. “Are you waiting on the train to Paris, too?”

“Why, yes, I am,” I replied as I took her arm. “Why don’t we just sit in the waiting room they have here. It’s ever so much nicer than standing out here in the rain.”

Ruth was given to fits of crying, which usually brought tears from Mabel as well. Crying over people that she’d never known, men she’d never met, I’m sure.

“Oh Cal, Cal,” she wept bitterly one day from her bed. “Why did you go Cal? Where did you go? Why didn’t you take me with you Cal?”

“Not that I know,” Uncle Ed said that evening when he stopped by. “She dated lots of guys, true enough, but I don’t recall a Cal.”

It took three years – three very long years – before they were completely missing and unable to communicate at all.

Ed followed shortly on, although he’s not completely missing just yet. We’ve put him in a home now. How I wish I had time to sit with him as I did with the Aunties, but life presses on without relief and Ed needs more attention than I can give. According to the nurses, he still gets up every morning at five and dresses for work in his store, going over lists of items and produce he needs to order. He sits in a soft chair near the fireplace and has conversations with friends, mostly long gone now. Still in all, he’s spritely enough for someone in his eighties.

Scooter Davis and his brother, Big Al, now run Kendall Grocery. It’s still standing, much as it always has, at that sweeping corner just off State Route fifty two. Of course, the state has re-paved and widened the shoulders some, but the school bus still stops and my kids always meet me there at the end of the day.

“I sure do miss ’em,” Scooter said one hot August day as we waited for the bus. He and Big Al sat in the Aunties’ chairs.

“They be missing, sure enough,” Big Al said. “When you suppose they comin back?”

I had no answer for him. They weren’t really missing, not truly. When things get too tense or too heavy, when life just seems too oppressive, one of us farts. Dakota and I still break into uncontrollable laughter when we’re together. And it’s their fault.

## *Memorial Service*

*Sharon Fish Mooney*

The first to leave you was your youngest child,  
lost to your memories of time gone by,  
then one by one more relatives took flight;  
once out of sight, then they were out of mind.  
Then later you forgot your husband’s face,  
forgot his name as plaques and tangles wrapped  
around your thoughts and you just wandered off  
into a land where you’d not been before.  
Though you misplaced sweet memories of your kin  
and of yourself as you grew older, frail,  
you still retained your spirit, gentle, kind,  
your own true self, for us the tie that binds  
us to you still, trusting that you now know  
it’s time for loved ones to remember you.

## *Duty Bound*

*Joanne Faries*

she worked in a girdle factory  
    Constrained  
    Restrained  
elastic to push and pull  
nature's bounty

husband died at fifty leaving a  
mortgage during the depression

    no Complaints  
    no Regrets

she paid the bills  
attended church  
grateful for health  
food, two kids, and a roof

dutiful contentment  
unquestioning commitment

she never left the house  
without wearing her girdle

## Don't Call Me Chicken

Wynne Huddleston

I remember Grandma Alice as a round ball of soft cuddles bouncing up and down in her rocking chair on the front porch, steadily waving a church fan with one hand, her plump, bare feet with perfectly angled toes (like mine) pushing off the floor to keep a quick, steady rhythm. The only thing sharp about her was the edge of her glasses when she hugged me, and maybe the lessons she taught me.

Whenever I spent the night with her I knew I'd wake up in the morning to the smell of thick rind bacon, steaming hot Cream of Wheat, and coffee with milk and sugar poured into a blue willow cup. The toast would be piled high with melted, orange hoop-cheese, or slathered in butter and topped with sugar and cinnamon. We also had fresh eggs.

One day she asked me to gather them. I didn't really want to – I was terrified of those chickens, so I told her I wasn't sure how to do it. She said there was nothing to it; just open the door and pick them up. I couldn't say no. I picked up the bucket and headed out the back door.

The chickens were in an old wooden, musty-smelling coop, and through the slats of the partition I could see into the shed on the other side where Grandma kept all the bows from the flowers that came from Uncle Basil's funeral. It was sad and creepy. My trembling hand flipped the little wooden latch up, and the door sprung wide open. The chickens, who had been

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*"There are no holy places and no holy people, only holy moments, only*

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sitting in nests atop their empty prison cages, flew up into the air in fright at the disturbance...right at me, it seemed, clucking their jerky heads off. The coop was filled with feathers and beaks and squawks; I was scared half to death! But I knew I couldn't let Grandma down, so I focused on my task: get the eggs. Lowering my head and gathering my floating guts, I forced myself through the crazy, noisy, protesting, clawing and scratching mob. I eased my hand into the nests, grabbed hold of the eggs, and put them into the basket without breaking them – all the while terrified that one would peck me.

Grandma probably knew how scared I was, but she taught me some important lessons: Be strong, determined, and have courage. Face your fears by keeping your eye on your goal...and don't drop the eggs while running away when you're done!

*Lena Lorice Kerley*

*Barbara B. Rollins*

A twentieth century woman,  
 educated, hub of a far-flung circle  
 connected by penny postcards.  
 Attracted and repelled by Joe,  
 an untamed spirit, married 'midst  
 a blue norther Ground Hog Day 1910  
 they vowed to cease their quarrels –  
 and did – a gamble of heart and head,  
 she hit the jackpot.

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*moments of wisdom.” Unknown ~§~ “There is this difference between*

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## *Grandma Cass*

*Duncan MacCarthy Whitmire*

It's the cigarette smoke that trails off the lit end and never gets inhaled. It's the deer that hesitates beside the road instead of jumping into your headlights. To Grandma Cass, life was the sum of all the things that could have killed you, and didn't.

When I was eight, Grandma Cass took me for my first trip into the city, an hour away by train. Waiting on the platform she smoked unfiltered Camels and told me at least half these rides ended in catastrophe. Her face looked skeletal in the sunlight and she gazed down on me with pale eyes.

"I been in one once," she said, "a catastrophe that is. Only thing kept me alive was I didn't have the panic in me."

"What should I do?"

"Nothing you can do." At that the locomotive skated into the station and she handed me my ticket.

We sat in one of the crowded cars and I looked around to take stock of the people on board. The weather had been dry for a while, and everyone's traveling clothes were tinted brownish gray with dust. Except for a worried-looking young mother, these didn't seem like the kind of folks who had the panic in them. They looked tired and bored, just like Grandma Cass.

I don't think I said two words that whole ride. Trains sound different to me now, but on that day the whistle was a trumpet, the wheels clacking along the track were the hoof beats of the very end itself. I sat bolt upright, so still I didn't even dare pray.

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*happiness and wisdom, that he that thinks himself the happiest man*

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Once – only once – I braved a look sideways. I turned my head to the window, but before I could face the glass the world went black. Our movement felt unbroken and the sounds were closer in the darkness. I was dumbfounded by how smooth our transition had been. There hadn't been time for fear, but cold guilt swallowed me so that I was numb. When we burst forth into renewed daylight I was confused, but filled with the second breath of redemption. I wanted to inspect the other passengers to see their reaction, but I dared not twist my head again.

There was a flurry of new sounds, and a spike of anticipation as we finally slowed to a stop. I looked around, expecting everybody to cheer that we'd made it alive, to hug and shake hands, but like Grandma Cass, nobody seemed too inspired by the luck of it all.

They all filed past, not one recognizing my confused and plaintive looks. Grandma Cass had fallen asleep and so I nudged her once the car had emptied and the fear of the train leaving with us still aboard surpassed my hesitation to wake her up. She was smiling, and it occurred to me I hadn't ever seen her do that.

Everything was still, except for my eyes as they searched the car, my person, and Grandma Cass for some sign of what to do. My fists clutched her coat sleeve and I felt the baking flush of fever on my forehead.

But it was worse than that. I smelled urine and figured I must've wet myself, like a baby, Daddy always said. One shameful hand pulled itself away from my grandmother's coat and searched the creases on my lap.

I was dry. And so I fell backwards against the window, my body limp as the panic flashed through me and evaporated like river water off skin in summertime. The air sat heavy and I realized that this here would be my very first catastrophe, and

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*really is so; but he that thinks himself the wisest is generally the great-*

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it had come to sit along side me, silent, without flames or screams or chaos.

## *I Don't Eat Spicy Foods Anymore* *Tess Almendarez Lojacono*

I don't eat spicy foods anymore,  
Nor read the paper  
Nor watch much TV.  
I brush my teeth with warm water.  
Take off my glasses when I really want to see.

At mass I sometimes can't make out the hymnal  
And so sing the wrong words, loudly and off-key.  
I walk my dog instead of running  
And now and then  
Enjoy a comfortable cup of tea.

One day soon I'll quit coloring my hair,  
Garden more and chase the children less.  
The books I read will all be poetry.  
I'll look at my life as a movie,  
Clapping my hands at the parts I liked best.

## *Wash Day*

*Bonnie Stanard*

Every Saturday was the same  
unless it rained. Early in the morning Grandma built  
a fire under the iron pot and filled it  
with water from the well.

By the time her brood awoke, she was collecting  
the week's wear from under beds, behind trunks,  
and "the dirty clothes," a corner hidden  
by a cloth hanging on a string.

From one pile, she sorted to make  
several she either soaked or scrubbed  
in either the hot pot or the tin tub.

With backbreaking rhythm,  
she dipped sheets up and down  
and twisted each into a spiral  
that coiled up her arm  
while loose water flurried out the tail.

Towels followed undershirts, drawers,  
and socks, and toward conclusion  
denim followed twills and corduroy.

Overalls with oily stains simmered  
until she lapped them across her paddle  
to port them from the pot to the wash table  
where a flogging raised steam in winter.

The twisted and cleaned clothes  
stretched out in the sun  
on wires strung between chinaberry trees.  
At sundown, Grandma gathered and piled on her bed  
whatever was dry until after supper.  
As silence grew deeper into night  
the swish and chuff of her ironing  
arose as sound,  
hardly audible her sighs.

## *November's End*

*Joseph M. Gant*

Friday morning funeral cars,  
The procession of the living.  
Lights turned on – the church  
A mile behind us . . .

My first Methodist service:  
Table top casket,  
White on white.  
And I think of  
Grandma's house —  
Grandma's home.

## *Mother Willow*

*Karen Kelsay*

You are the gentle willow, who I often  
thought looked weak. Your strong-willed  
child that made her loud debut among  
your branches, hanging

in the adolescent wind, has grown.  
Your leaves have turned a softer lemon-green.  
Sparrows gather on your quiet sleeves  
to nest. It's peaceful in your presence.

Once, I could not see enchanting shadows  
that you cast. Your bark is deep with lines,  
and catkin clusters free themselves  
to float across the twilight's dark divide

where little drowsy seeds prevail  
along the moonlit trails.

## Country Doctor

Ellen E. Withers

The ringing phone pulled him from sleep. He stumbled through the darkness toward the telephone.

“Dr. Gorrell? This is Minnie Sue Barber.” Her voice trembled. “Johnnie Sims just rode up here and asked me to call. Martha’s labored for hours and the baby’s not come. They need you.”

“Of course,” he said. “Be there as soon as possible.”

“The bridge is out, so he’ll meet you at the stream with a horse.”

A horse? He sighed. Another adventure into the backwoods for this old man. “Thanks for calling, Minnie Sue.”

“Sorry to wake you, Doc.”

“That’s the way with babies.”

He made his way down the hall, his head swirling with a plethora of medical maladies that might explain why Martha Sims was having trouble. She’d previously given birth to three healthy children with a mid-wife, so calling him meant a big problem.

In the bedroom, Jewell’s disembodied voice came from the darkness. “Are you going to need me?”

His wife was an excellent, though untrained, nurse and she’d assisted him for years. But the rainy night and prospect of arriving by horseback caused him concern.

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*dom.” James Huneker ~S~ “It requires wisdom to understand wisdom:*

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“I think it’ll be fine without you. One of the local mid-wives should be there.”

“Who is it?”

“Martha Sims. Been laboring awhile and nothing’s happening.”

She tossed the covers from the bed. “I’ll fix you a bite to eat.”

He nodded and dressed quickly, then went to his medical closet in the spare bedroom. Inside a glass cabinet, he chose several forceps from the instruments of his trade. Forceps were necessary at times, but because of the damage they did to babies and their mothers, he used them only when necessary.

A glance at the medications he had on hand made him feel better. Selecting several jars, he poured pills into small white packets, marking them for identification.

Jewell had his fried egg sandwich ready when he entered the kitchen. With a smile, he said, “Don’t worry. We’ll get this baby here safely and keep Mama, too.” He hoped the bravado of his words hid his concerns.

Jewell’s slight smile told him she saw through to his apprehension, but was too much of a lady to call him a liar.

His 1933 Buick was nearly ten years old, but would have to last until the war was over. He grinned when he pressed the dash-mounted starter button and the engine roared to life.

As one of two doctors in the county too old to be drafted, he received additional rationing points for gasoline and tires. Some months had been close, but he hadn’t run out of either. *God, let it remain so.*

It was hard to eat his sandwich, steer, and see through the pouring rain, but he made it to the road of the Sims place in record time. Their dirt road was rough as a washboard and the holes caused his car to dip at precarious angles. After a few minutes, his headlights illuminated Johnnie on his horse. He

pulled as far to the side of the road as he dared, gathered his bag and shot out of the car.

The rain was torrential. The brim of his hat kept it from his eyes, but with each movement, water cascaded inside his raincoat and soaked his clothes.

Johnnie rode close and said, "Thanks for coming, Doc."

"Glad to," he said and tossed his bag to him.

Johnnie settled it in front of him, then kicked his foot out of the stirrup for the physician to use.

With a groan, the doctor grabbed the offered hand and hoisted his 200 pounds onto the animal.

The two wet men made their way through the rain-swollen creek and over the bank. Soon, the lights of the house shined the way through the brush.

Johnnie dropped him in front of the house, where the doctor slung his coat and hat onto a rocker on the porch and pushed open the door without knocking.

Three lumps of sleeping children were on the divan. He followed the sound of whimpers to the bedroom, rainwater pouring onto the wood floor with each step.

Martha was half-sitting, half-lying on the bed while the mid-wife, Sarah Joseph, held her hand.

He was glad to see Sarah was here, as the other mid-wife had less experience. He turned to the expectant mother.

"Hear there's a baby coming," he said.

Martha looked at him with tired eyes, her hair as wet as his but soaked with sweat instead of rainwater. "I'm having trouble getting it here."

"We'll get it done."

He visually examined his patient and immediately saw the problem.

"Martha, we're going to wash up and get some things out to help you."

“Thanks, Doc.” Martha said in a voice weak from labor.

In hushed tones outside the door, he explained the problem to Sarah. “The placenta is in front of the baby, blocking the way to the birth canal. Placenta previa. It’s rare, but we see it often with older mothers.”

Sarah nodded, her brow furrowed in concern.

Johnnie entered the house and immediately made his way to them, his lips scrunched into a thin line.

“Johnnie, go and hold Martha’s hand,” the doctor said. “We’ll be just a second.”

With no hesitation, he turned on his worn boot heel and splashed into the bedroom.

“Normally, this is resolved by surgery but there’s no way Martha or the baby would survive long enough to get to the hospital.”

“What do we do?” Sarah asked.

“We’re going to have to open her up vaginally as much as possible, then get the placenta out, and then the baby. As quickly as possible. Once that placenta is out, the baby won’t have oxygen.”

“Can you give her something for the pain?”

“Not much. She has to be able to push.” He shot her a reassuring smile. “Let’s get cleaned up.”

They washed in the kitchen in silence, glad to have a moment to think. He’d never handled a placenta previa outside of a hospital and they’d all involved surgery. At least, he was familiar with the risks and had an experienced mid-wife to assist. The fact that Martha was a tough, healthy woman was a blessing, too.

Back in the bedroom, he opened his bag and found the packet containing a slight sedative that wouldn’t knock the sense out of Martha. Sarah gave it to her, while he arranged his instruments.



“Martha, we’re going to have to increase your birthing space, so I’m going to have to make some cuts. I’ll sew ’em up when we’re through. I hope that medicine will take the edge off of your pain, but I can’t give you anything stronger until it’s over.”

Johnnie answered for her. “She’ll be fine, Doc.”

We worked with speed. Johnnie attended to Martha, while the doctor made the necessary cuts and Sarah assisted, wiping up blood and handling instruments.

The contractions were strong. At the next significant contraction, they had Martha push as hard as she could.

“The placenta is coming first,” the doctor explained. “The baby’s running second in this race.” He used forceps to pull the placenta out of the way.

The baby’s head appeared at the next contraction.

He’d counted the seconds since he’d delivered the placenta and the time to prevent brain damage was short. He placed the forceps on the baby, trying not to harm the eyes or mouth.

The head was wedged in the birth canal and, because the water had broken so long ago, there was little left to aid delivery. So much water outside the house, yet not nearly enough inside.

He applied gentle pressure and the next strong contraction helped push the head free, stopping at the shoulders.

Without hesitation, he cleared the airway and prayed for the baby to take its first breath, but nothing happened.

The next contraction served to slide the baby free and the young man fell into Sarah’s waiting hands. The doctor grabbed the boy, blue from lack of oxygen, and flipped him over. With firm pats on his back, the intake of air was encouraged.

Silence.

The doctor dangled him upside down and tried again. Nothing! Turning the baby’s face toward him, he carefully blew a puff of air into his lungs. The air lifted the baby’s chest, so he

blew again and again. His fingers trembled. He prayed for a miracle.

Then it happened. He felt the chest rise and a tiny whimper of sound was heard, followed by a bellowing howl.

He placed the new young man into the arms of his mother with a grin. “Good work, Martha. He’s a fine lad.”

## *The Way Of It*

*Sharon Lask Munson*

A man gets used to things —  
 scent of a woman, her skin, hair  
 hands perfumed with onion, bay leaf  
 neck stretched, a nesting crane  
 as she peeks through small-paned windows  
 searching gray skies.

A man gets used to life —  
 head bent to sacred writings  
 a wooden chair, a bench  
 a glass of lemon tea  
 obeyed by his children  
 but distant from the chatter and joy  
 of their fleeting childhoods.

A man gets used to seasons  
 ciphering days and dreams —  
 walking narrow pathways

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*knowing you know nothing.” Socrates ~§~ “The young man knows the*

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as autumn leaves  
mark the year's passing.

He teeters on a tightrope —  
unsteady jobs, a hopeful handshake  
the comfortable sameness of town  
the teacher, the butcher, the shul  
a skullcap, as faint as clear mist  
as weightless as the one thin strand of hair  
that drifts toward first light  
and morning prayers.

## *Haibun for Papa*

*Carl Palmer*

Unable to remember what happened yesterday, recall  
a name, date or telephone number, he will tell again  
every embarrassing detail of an event that happened  
back twenty years ago.

stories about mommy  
when she was young  
grandgirls laugh

## Buttons

*Lisa Rizzo*

Grandma fell sick every summer —  
huddled on the front steps in her housedress,  
its white buttons like open eyes – witness to her depression.  
If she felt strong enough, she went to church  
in her good black coat adorned with large sparkly buttons like  
shields.

Grandpa was a tall man never undone enough to laugh —  
wore his hat on the back of his head and chambray shirts  
fastened under his chin.

Canvas coat flapping against the stock of his gun,  
he tramped the woods with his hound named John.

Grandma collected unused buttons in a Mason jar cracked  
and no good for canning. She could dip her hands in anytime  
Grandpa needed a shirt mended. He might sit across the porch  
as she sewed,  
both of them staring out at the woods across the highway,  
silent and buttoned tight.

## *My Grandmother Numbered Her Eggs* *James Vescovi*

My grandmother, Desolina, numbered her eggs. I noticed this once when I went looking in her refrigerator for butter. I saw a half dozen eggs in the tray, numbered one to six. She'd written the numbers on the shells in blue ink.

There was much I didn't understand about my 89-year-old grandmother, who'd immigrated to America from Italy in 1930. She lived with my grandfather, Tony, in a small apartment in Queens, New York. For example, she liked to write words on scraps of paper. Sometimes it was to remind herself of things she needed to remember, such as "*Jimmy al vena a Sabato mesdi*" to remind her of my weekly visit every Saturday at noon. Other times I think she wrote things down because she had nothing else to do. I would find notes describing the weather: *Oggi piove, domani molto freddo* ("today, rain, tomorrow very cold").

My father, their son, came by occasionally to help them do their marketing. One afternoon, his mother handed him a shopping list that read:

*pollo*  
*pane*  
*spaghetti*  
*arancio*  
*zucherro*  
*sale*

*latte*  
*pastene*  
*rubato*

He eyed the list. All the words made sense – chicken, bread, orange juice, sugar – except the last, “rubato.”

“*Cosa vuol’ dire ‘rubato?’*?” he asked his mother. “What is this ‘rubato?’”

She slapped her forehead. “Oh yeah,” she said. “*Papa l’an ruba, pover uom, tre giorni fa. Martedì.* Papa was robbed, poor man. Three days ago. On Tuesday.”

“*L’han rubato?!*” my father asked. “He was robbed?!”

It now made sense. The Italian verb “to rob” is *rubare*. Desolina’s memory was typical of people in their late eighties: While she could still remember the exact birthdays of her six siblings, who’d died long ago, she sometimes couldn’t recall at night what she’d eaten for lunch. She had been afraid she would forget the robbery, and she knew that my grandfather, Tony, the taciturn, old warrior that he was, would never tell anyone.

My father, his eyes filling with tears at the thought of the robbery, turned to his father, who was sitting on the couch with arms folded.

“*Pa, e vero?*” he asked. “Pop, is this true?”

My grandfather shrugged. That made it true.

“Were you hurt?” asked my father.

“They just pushed me down and grabbed my money. I hurt my knee a little,” Tony said. Little remained of his rock-hard stone-worker’s physique. “The punks! If only I’d have been 10 years younger!”

Until they died in their mid-nineties, my grandparents had other surprises in store for my father and me. One day my father and I needed to get inside the *baulo* for some family records. The *baulo* was a pine-green steamer trunk that my grandmother had used to transport her possessions when she immigrated to

New York in 1930. It was now used to hold family records, as well as to store the sheets and pillowcases that Desolina had embroidered during her engagement to my grandfather and which she gave to my mother and sister in dribs and drabs and with great ceremony. Also inside was special costume jewelry, and everything was sealed in envelopes or wrapped in old fabric and sprinkled liberally with camphor.

Desolina, a short portly woman with skin nearly as fresh as a baby's, complained whenever anyone had to get into the *baulo*. She acted as if it were some high-interest bank account that could only be drawn once a decade. She'd make you wait outside the closed door of her bedroom, where the *baulo* sat next to a radiator, and she called you back in after she'd procured the trunk's only key. No one knew exactly where she kept it.

While you searched for what you wanted, she'd hover behind you, saying *stay away from this* or *don't touch that* and hurry it up with, *c'mon, what are you trying to find, we threw it out long ago*.

As my father dug through the trunk for documents he needed to fill out medical forms, he began coming across sealed envelopes – some fresh and white, others yellowed and crinkled with time. He opened one. It held \$220. He ripped open another; it contained \$60. In a third was a crisp \$100 bill.

*"C'mon, basta, sera il baulo e lasa ster tut!"* Desolina said to my father. "Enough. Close the trunk and leave everything alone!"

But he couldn't stop now. All he had to do was reach in, and he was in possession of two or three more envelopes containing cash. She kept yelling; he kept extracting envelopes. After he believed he'd found them all, my father brought them into the sitting room and dropped them on a table. Also spilling out was more than \$2,000.

Tony was taking a cat nap on the couch, but the sound of envelopes being ripped open awoke him. He got up and tottered over. The table looked like the site of a craps game; there were \$20s, \$50s, and \$100s stacked up with curling edges and held in place with a sugar bowl, an ashtray, and a wine bottle.

“*Dovet le trova?*” he asked. “Where did you find this?”

“*Nel baulo,*” my father said.

“*Nel baulo?!*” Tony hollered, looking up in shock to the heavens. He trained his furious eyes on his wife, who stood sheepishly nearby. “What is all this money doing in the house?!” he cried.

“*Io non so,* I don’t know,” she said. “I put it away and forgot about it.”

“*Porco cane!*” he yelled, fists clenched. “What if the building burned down?!” He turned to my father. “*Cuanti soldi, Selvi?* How much is it?”

“*Io conto,*” my father replied. “I’m still counting.”

Desolina was the household keeper of the money. Every month, Tony cashed their social security checks, along with his pension check and an occasional check he received from the Italian government as a World War I vet. He brought the money home from the bank and gave it to his wife, who doled the cash out.

By the time my father had stopped counting, \$9,600 had been fished out of the *baulo*. Tony was wagging a finger at his wife who, clasping her hands, was pleading for mercy. He kept pacing the floor, repeating, “*Nove mille sei cento scudi!* Nine thousand six hundred bucks!”

My father made one more pass through the trunk to make sure there wasn’t so much as a penny left inside. He looked at his watch. It was just before 3 p.m. He raced to the bank to deposit the loot.



A year later, when my father again went fishing for something in the *baulo*, he found \$1,900.

## Why Grandma Bought That Car Anne R. Allen

She dreamed of riding with Kerouac, with Todd and Buzz,  
red-Corvetting down Route 66 —  
freedom in her hair.

But she got snagged on white-picket biology/destiny —  
and the goofy smile that farmer gave her,  
along with his fragile heart.

She loved that smile more than her own self, a full forty  
years —

till his heart broke for good and she buried him  
in the root-clogged dirt of this old town.

But for her, the road's still there.  
and in this dream, she's not riding;  
she's at the wheel.

Some work included in *From the Porch Swing* has been previously published, though the authors retain all rights to the material. Previous publication history appears below.

Saturday Nights, *Noble Generation II*, 2004 ~ What did we know of loss? *Artella* 2009, online ~ Heart-Keeper *Lilith* ~ A Gift From Mother a shorter version appeared in *The Rocking Chair Reader—Memories from the Attic*, Copyright 2005 F+W Publications, Inc. ~ The Linen Press *Lubbock Magazine*, June 1996 ~ Quiet Song *Canadian Zen Haiku*, editor, Richard Vallance, Ottawa, Canada, August, 2009; *Building 45*, Chemeketa College, Salem, Oregon, May, 2009 (both online periodicals) ~ Where There's a Will, There's a Way *Our Fathers who art in Heaven*, 2005 by WAH Publishing ~ Geode *Feed Sack Majesty*, Fortunate Childe Publications, 2009 ~ To Dettner (My Grandmother) *A Treasury of American Poetry III*, 2007 ~ He Winds The Clocks chapbook, *No Sense Of History* ~ Becoming Nana *The Redwood Writer*, April, 2010; Poetry on the Bus, Sebastopol (California) Center for the Arts in November, 2000 ~ Legacy *Drown in my Own Fears* ~ Grandma's Memory Course *The Village Sun*, Lady Lake, FL ~ Grandmother's Dollar *Houston Chronicle*, 2002 ~ Fishing with Gramps *Chick Flicks*, June, 2005 ~ The Color of Summer Trees *The Orange Room Review*; chapbook *Matryoshkas*, Victorian Violet Press, 2010 under the title "Quilts" ~ Feed Sack Majesty *Mississippi Crow; Flight Risk*, (Fortunate Childe Publications, 2010); *Feed Sack Majesty*, chapbook, (Fortunate Childe Publications, 2009) ~ Vespers at Mama-Teen's *Feed Sack Majesty* (Fortunate Childe Publications, 2009) ~ Antique Clock *Written Word Magazine*, 2007 ~ Gramma Might Have Told Me A different version of this was published in *Harvest Magazine*, 1989 ~ Most Beautiful of All A different version of this story was published by Howard Books in *The Best Grandma in the World* in July of 2007 ~ In Her Grandmother's Room read as part of an Apron Show presented at the Southwest Harbor Library (Maine) and again at Schoodic Arts For All (Maine). It is archived at the Library. ~ Patchwork in the anthology *THEREFORE I AM* published by Clan-U Press, England, 2008 ~ A Small Town in Normandy *My Weekly*, UK ~ Grandpa Dances chapbook, *Moonburn*, Big Table Publishing Co., Boston, MA, 2009 ~ The Christmas Cake *Mature Living*, 2006 ~ Comfort *Welcome Home*, May, 2002; newsletter of the Oakmont retirement home, Chico, CA, March 2001 ~ Cigar *Map of Austin Poetry; WordWrights; More than Anything* ~ Lodgia chapbook *Matryoshkas*, Victorian Violet Press, 2010 ~ The Memory of Taste *Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*, webzine, October, 2008 ~ Grandma Cass Duncan *Amarillo Bay*, October 2007 ~ Why Grandma Bought That Car *Women's Press*, San Luis Obispo, CA, July-August 2008 ~ Keepsake Renee Emerson 196 **i don't have this file** ~ Some Things I Want My Granddaughters To Know Renie Burghardt 161 **Published online on blog** ~ ~ What Comes With Age Tess Almdarez Lojacono 142 **pub history not given** ~ I Don't Eat Spicy Foods Anymore Tess Almdarez Lojacono 277 **pub history not given** ~ Tillie Mary Krauss 244 **pub history not given** ~ The Dress Mary Krauss 108 **pub history not given** ~ Making Way for Miss Mary Barbara Darnall 35 **pub history not given** ~ Mamie Barbara Darnall 254 **pub history not given** ~ West Texas Wheat Farmer with Early Alzheimers Sheryl Nelms **pub history not given** ~ Salting Down Sheryl L. Nelms 225 **pub history not given** ~ On the North Porch Sheryl L. Nelms 88 **pub history not given** ~ Grandma's Gypsies Sheryl L. Nelms 94 **pub history not given** ~ Ode to Her Portrait Carl Palmer 180 **pub history not given** ~ Haibun for Papa Carl Palmer 71 **pub history not given** ~ Painted Nylon Seams Megan Engelhardt 160 **pub history not given** ~ KP Duty Glenda Barrett 50 **pub history not given** ~ The Way of It Sharon Lask Munson 286 **pub history not given** ~ Little Things Jim Wisneski 125 **pub history not given** ~ Horse Racing With Pappy Linda O'Connell 24 **pub history not given** ~ Life Lessons Blanche Ledford 212 **pub history not given**

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ster ~§~ "Wisdom begins in wonder. ~Socrates ~§~ "Wisdom doesn't

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